Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)

NJ Health
New Jersey Department of Health

Frequently Asked Questions about Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)

What is Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)?
Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) is a condition in girls/women that happens when the normal balance of bacteria in the vagina is disrupted and replaced by an overgrowth of certain bacteria. It is sometimes accompanied by discharge, odor, pain, itching, or burning.

How common is BV?
BV is the most common vaginal infection in girls/women of childbearing age. It is also very common in pregnant women.

How do people get BV?
The cause of BV is not fully understood. However, BV is associated with an imbalance in the bacteria that are normally found in the vagina. The vagina normally contains mostly "good" bacteria, and fewer "harmful" bacteria. BV develops when there is an increase in harmful bacteria.

Any girl or woman can get BV. However, some activities or behaviors can upset the normal balance of bacteria in the vagina and increase the risk of BV occurring. These activities include having a new sex partner, having multiple sex partners and/or douching.

Women/girls do not get BV from toilet seats, bedding, swimming pools, or from touching objects around them. Women/girls who have never had sexual intercourse can also get BV.

What are the signs and symptoms of BV?
Most women and girls with BV do not have any signs or symptoms. However, possible symptoms include an abnormal vaginal discharge with an unpleasant odor that is usually white or gray in color and may be thin. Burning during urination or itching around the outside of the vagina are other possible symptoms of BV.

What health risks are associated with BV?
In most cases, BV causes no complications. But there are some serious risks for girls/women who have BV including:

- Increased risk of HIV infection if exposed to the HIV virus.
- Increased chance that an HIV-infected woman will pass HIV to her sex partner(s).
- Increased chance of infection after surgical procedures involving reproductive organs.
- Increased risks for pregnant women, including preterm delivery and ectopic pregnancy
- Increased risk of becoming infected with STDs if exposed (e.g. chlamydia, gonorrhea or herpes simplex virus)

How does BV affect pregnant women?

Pregnant women with BV are more likely to have babies who are born premature or with low birth weight (less than 5.5 pounds).

The bacteria that cause BV can sometimes infect the uterus (womb) and fallopian tubes (tubes that carry eggs from the ovaries to the uterus). Damage to the fallopian tubes can increase the risk of ectopic pregnancy (when a fertilized egg grows outside the uterus). Ectopic pregnancy can be a life-threatening condition.

How is BV diagnosed?

A health care provider must examine the vagina for signs of BV and perform laboratory tests on a sample of vaginal fluid to look for bacteria associated with BV.

How is BV treated?

BV is curable with antibiotics prescribed by a health care provider. Two different antibiotics are recommended as treatment for BV: metronidazole or clindamycin.

Although BV will sometimes clear up without treatment, all women with symptoms of BV should be treated to avoid complications. BV can recur after treatment.

All pregnant women who have symptoms of BV should be checked and treated. Pregnant women who have had a premature delivery or low birth weight baby should be examined for BV and treated if needed.

How Can BV be prevented?

The following basic prevention steps can help reduce the risk of upsetting the natural balance of bacteria in the vagina and developing BV:

- Abstain from vaginal, oral and anal sex
- Limit the number of sex partners
- Do not douche
- If diagnosed with BV, use all of the medicine prescribed by the health care provider, even if the symptoms go away

Where can I get more information?

- Your healthcare provider
- New Jersey Department of Health website: www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: www.cdc.gov/std/bv/
- CDC-INFO Contact Center at:
  English and Spanish
  (800) CDC-INFO
  (800) 232-4636
  TTY: (888) 232-6348

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